

# A Clarification and Defense of the Notion of Grounding<sup>1</sup>

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Forthcoming in Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder, eds., *Grounding and Explanation* (Cambridge University Press).

## 1 Introduction

This paper defends a particular version of the idea that there is a non-causal relation of determination, *grounding*, often expressed by the phrase ‘in virtue of’. This relation corresponds to certain non-causal explanations, including those philosophers give, e.g., in saying that a statue has its aesthetic properties in virtue of its physical properties, or that a thing has its dispositional features in virtue of its categorical features, or that a person has a reason to believe that  $p$  in virtue of her perceptual experiences. Indeed, it is the fact that there are such explanations, together with the fact that their correctness cannot be underwritten by any causal relation, that makes it incumbent on us to recognize grounding.

The claim that there is a grounding relation has been attacked from various quarters. There are those who consider the very idea of grounding incoherent. And there are those who try to undermine it by arguing that it cannot do the philosophical work its advocates want it to do. I will answer the most serious such objections below. But first, I want to sketch my own conception of grounding, and show how it differs from some of the other conceptions on the table. I believe my conception evades certain objections that the other views must tackle head-on (in part because I deny that certain cases to which some authors appeal are genuine cases of grounding).

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<sup>1</sup> I received extensive comments on an earlier draft from Michael J. Clark, Chris Daly, Kit Fine, Jonathan Lowe, Jonathan Schaffer, and Dennis Whitcomb. I am very grateful to them for their help and advice, though I have not yet been able to address all of the issues they raised. I also thank Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder for inviting me to present at the Because II conference, sponsored by the Phlox Research Group, at the Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, August 2010. There I received very helpful feedback from the organizers and participants. I learned more than I can express through this paper. In particular, I thank Elizabeth Barnes, Ross Cameron, Shamik Dasgupta, Louis deRosset, Geoff Ferrari, Mark Jago, Carrie Jenkins, Stephan Leuenberger, Thomas Sattig, Kelly Trogon, and Steve Yablo.

On my view, grounding is not a bridge between two degrees of reality, and it does not allow us to take for granted the existence of disputed entities (like numbers, norms, or complex objects), trading questions of their existence for questions of their fundamentality.<sup>2</sup> On my view, grounded facts and ungrounded facts are equally real, and grounded facts are an “addition of being” over and above the facts in which they are grounded. The mere fact that some entity is grounded does not make it any more (or less) ontologically innocent. The grounded is every bit as real—and real in precisely the same sense—as that which grounds it.

My approach here will be to elucidate grounding within the boundaries set by some of my other metaphysical positions. For example, I will largely assume a substance-attribute ontology in which properties and particulars represent mutually irreducible ontological categories. I will assume that facts must involve the instantiation of genuine properties. And I will assume that existence is not a property, and that there are no disjunctive properties.<sup>3</sup> The cost of working within these assumptions is that the resulting theory will not serve to adjudicate certain metaphysical disputes that one might have thought grounding was supposed to help settle.<sup>4</sup> The benefit is that those who agree with me about other areas of metaphysics will see how grounding can be rendered compatible with our shared metaphysical beliefs. One reason it is important to me to show that grounding can be posited within these constraints is that I have genuinely worried at times that it could not be.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 A Rough Sketch of Grounding

Grounding is the relation expressed by certain uses of the phrase ‘in virtue of’, as in ‘the act is wrong in virtue of its non-moral properties’. I do not claim that every felicitous use of ‘in virtue of’ should be taken to express grounding. Rather, we should begin to regiment our use of ‘in virtue of’ to fall in line with the philosophical theory of grounding. Below I will discuss certain uses of the term that, though they are perfectly good English, ought to be avoided on metaphysical grounds. We should not use ‘in virtue of’ where it

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<sup>2</sup> Here I differ from Fine 2001, and Schaffer 2009.

<sup>3</sup> I argue that there are no disjunctive properties in Audi MSb.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks in particular to Kit Fine for pointing out the costs of my approach.

<sup>5</sup> Discussions with John Heil have been especially helpful in this regard by providing very sensible challenges to the idea of grounding.

might express a reflexive relation, such as identity. Since grounding is a relation of determination, and closely linked to the concept of explanation, it is irreflexive and asymmetric. So it would be a mistake, for example, to say that someone is a bachelor *in virtue of* being an unmarried eligible man, if to be a bachelor *just is* to be an unmarried eligible man.<sup>6</sup>

On my view, grounding is a singular relation between facts, understood as things having properties and standing in relations. Facts, on this conception, are not true propositions, but obtaining states of affairs. They are individuated by their constituents and the manner in which those constituents are combined. Call this the *worldly* conception of facts. It is opposed to the *conceptual* view of facts, according to which facts will differ if they pick out an object or property via different concepts. It is not part of my theory that facts are a fundamental category of entity. Properties, particulars, and instantiation are fundamental. A fact is just a thing's instantiating a property (or some things' instantiating a relation).<sup>7</sup>

If grounding is a relation between facts so understood, then grounding is not a relation between *objects* or *substances*.<sup>8</sup> On my view, it would be a mistake to say, e.g., that the statue is grounded in the clay. We could try to render this in fact-talk as 'the fact that the statue exists is grounded in the fact that the clay exists', but this move fits poorly with the worldly conception of facts, because (I shall assume) existence is not a genuine property. So there really are no such facts, and so this case is not a candidate to be an example of grounding.<sup>9</sup> Of course, grounding may not be the only relation of ontological priority, and so this is consistent with holding that things like statues depend ontologically on their constituent matter.

On my view, grounding relations depend on the natures of the properties involved in them. Take a normative case. Let us suppose that you have a (defeasible) reason to believe that *p* in virtue of a certain sensory experience. It is of the essence of that experience to yield this reason (and of the essence of this

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<sup>6</sup> Here I differ from Fine 2001 and Rosen 2010. They agree on irreflexivity and asymmetry, but hold that the fact that someone is a bachelor can be distinguished from the fact that he is an unmarried man.

<sup>7</sup> If properties are tropes, then facts might just be identical with tropes, assuming that a given trope is essentially tied to the particular that possesses it.

<sup>8</sup> Here I differ from Schaffer 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Daly suggested to me that we might instead say the statue is grounded in the clay—in a derivative sense—when some genuine facts about the statue are grounded in genuine facts about the clay. I will not here give this idea the attention it deserves.

reason that one way it can come about is through that experience). It is not peculiar to you that when *you* have this experience, it grounds a reason of the relevant sort. Anyone with an experience of precisely the same kind will have a reason of precisely the same kind.<sup>10</sup> This illustrates the general fact that grounding relations do not vary from instance to instance of the properties involved in the facts in question.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, they do not vary from world to world. (I will return to the relation between grounding and the natures of properties below.)

### 3 The Argument for Grounding

Now, why should we accept that there is any relation answering to these descriptions? The reason we must countenance grounding is that it is indispensable to certain important explanations. Starting with the idea that explanations must answer why-questions, such as ‘why is *a* *F*?’, note that one way to answer such a question is to say what makes it the case that *a* is *F*—what, that is, determines *a*’s being *F*. This is a particularly important way to answer the why-question, since presumably the way the world is—as opposed to our concepts or interests—settles what determines what. An explanation whose correctness is underwritten by a determination relation, then, is an explanation that tells us something about the nature of our world. The interesting point, for our purposes, is that not all such explanations can be causal. For example, if we ask why a given act was obligatory, one clearly correct answer might be that its agent had promised it. But promising to  $\phi$  does not *cause*  $\phi$  to be obligatory. It seems overwhelmingly plausible to say that having been promised and being obligatory are properties of the same event (certainly of the same action), and so simply not candidates to be causally related.<sup>12</sup> Or, to take a non-normative

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<sup>10</sup> Content externalists should disagree not with my claim that grounding is invariant in this way, but rather with the assumption that the sensory experience—understood as a purely internal conscious experience—is sufficient to ground the relevant reason. They should claim instead that one has the relevant reason in virtue of having the sensory experience caused in the right way and in the right circumstances, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Applied to moral properties, this implies a strong metaphysical version of moral generalism, opposed to the views of Dancy 1993. I discuss this further in Audi forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Even defenders of fine-grained conceptions of events, who claim that we have two events here, must concede that they are awfully intimately related events. It is at best a strain to claim that events so closely related are cause and effect.

example, it seems that there is an explanation of why a sphere has the disposition to roll in terms of its shape. But being spherical does not *cause* things to have the power to roll. Nor is being spherical identical with the power to roll, since the power to roll is a power also of cylinders, which are not spherical.<sup>13</sup> So the fact that a given thing is spherical non-causally determines the fact that it has the power to roll.

It is worth making the argument explicit:

- (1) If one fact explains another, then the one plays some role in determining the other.
- (2) There are explanations in which the explaining fact plays no causal role with respect to the explained fact.
- (3) Therefore, there is a non-causal relation of determination.

The argument is valid, but the premises are controversial. Some will object to (1) on the ground that it makes explanation too ontologically robust, when in fact explanation is a merely pragmatic and heavily interest-relative affair.<sup>14</sup> Here, I will assume that this is false. The correctness or incorrectness of an explanation, I assume, is at least in part a matter of its matching up with the structure of the world, structure that is conferred by the determination relations that hold among the world's inhabitants.

But (1) might be doubted for a different reason, namely, that *determination* is not the only relation suited to underwrite the correctness of an explanation. In particular, one might think that *identity* can do so. For example, suppose one thinks that the kind water just is the kind H<sub>2</sub>O. One might think that, for this very reason, the fact that there is water in the glass is explained by the fact that there is H<sub>2</sub>O in it. I believe this is mistaken. Either this is not a genuine explanation, or the claim of identity is false.<sup>15</sup> For if there is truly identity here, we have neither the asymmetry nor the irreflexivity that explanations require.

One who agrees that identity cannot serve to make explanations correct might still think some other, appropriately asymmetric, non-causal relation is available. One might appeal here to the relation of *constitution*. (Note that I am assuming that constitution is not a determination relation, so that if it can do the

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<sup>13</sup> I argue at length that dispositional properties are grounded in categorical ones in Audi MSa. For the view that dispositions are identical with the categorical properties that apparently ground them, see Heil 2004.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., van Fraassen 1980, ch. 5.

<sup>15</sup> For a denial that water=H<sub>2</sub>O, see Johnston 1997.

required work, it is premise (1) that fails.) For example, one might think that items like statues are not identical with the matter of which they are constituted (even assuming that matter to be in a statue-like condition), and that the asymmetrical relation of constitution is what underlies the explanation of the statue in terms of its constituting matter and the properties of that matter. Whether or not this is a genuine explanation, it is clear that not every putative case of non-causal explanation can be supported by the constitution relation. For example, suppose the wrongness of a given act is explained by its natural properties. This is clearly not an analogous case; the natural properties do not constitute the wrongness in anything like the way an appropriately shaped lump of clay might constitute a statue.<sup>16</sup> So even if we allow some explanations to be underwritten by the constitution relation, we still need a non-causal relation of determination to account for the correctness of certain other explanations.<sup>17</sup>

Moving on to premise (2), its chief support is from examples. There are a number of putative examples of explanations in which it seems quite clear that causation is not involved at all. The plausibility of (2) hangs on the plausibility of treating these as genuine examples of explanation. Among the most compelling examples are:

- Normative facts are grounded non-normative facts.
- Dispositional facts are grounded in categorical facts.
- Aesthetic facts are grounded in non-aesthetic facts.
- Semantic facts are grounded in social and psychological facts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, I do not think it is correct to say that the natural properties of an act *constitute* its wrongness at all (though we do sometimes speak this way). Wrongness isn't *made up of* natural properties.

<sup>17</sup> If one takes constitution to be a case of grounding, then one will agree that constitution does not obviate the need for grounding, but disagree that we need grounding as an alternative to constitution. Jonathan Schaffer, for instance, would take constitution to be a case of grounding—provided constitution is not understood as identity (personal communication). One reason I resist treating constitution as grounding is that if what is being explained is the *existence* of the statue, then on my view we fail to have a genuine *fact*, the instantiation of a genuine property by something. The relation I am interested in is a relation intimately linked to the natures of properties. It seems to me that a relation of which material constitution is a case cannot be assimilated to this framework.

<sup>18</sup> Or, if externalism is true, semantic facts are grounded in social and psychological facts together with certain causal facts.

Why think these are cases of explanation? First, they are not cases of identity. Take a particular example of the first kind of case: a given act is wrong in virtue of being a lie (let us assume). Not all wrong acts are lies, and so the property of wrongness cannot be the property of being a lie.<sup>19</sup> Now, might the property *instances* be identical? Might it be the case that we have one trope here that is at once a wrongness trope and a lie trope? I think this makes sense only if we deny that there is truly a property of wrongness. One could claim, for example, that ‘wrongness’ does not pick out a genuine property, but can pick out any of a number of different properties that are loosely grouped by some imperfect similarity among them. I do not find this view very plausible, however. Take, say, a promise-breaking and a stabbing. Considered just in terms of their non-normative characteristics, do they seem imperfectly similar in any respect relevant to their *prima facie* wrongness? (They are imperfectly similar, surely, in irrelevant respects, such as occurring in space and time, involving the expenditure of energy, and so forth, but these similarities are shared with many permissible things as well. (A consequentialist, which I am not, may hold that the relevant similarities are extrinsic; both cause pain.)<sup>20</sup> There is in any case strong pre-theoretical support for the view that there is a property of wrongness.

This discussion illustrates one of the most important general convictions involved in my approach to grounding: it requires us to accept certain kinds of property (normative, dispositional, aesthetic, semantic) that are recognized in pre-theoretical thought, but that seem never to be instantiated brutally.<sup>21</sup> What

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<sup>19</sup> Wrongness also is not the disjunction of all particular wrong-making features. See Audi MSb for why I reject disjunctive properties.

<sup>20</sup> This rejection of wrongness is a special case of the view that determinate predicates simply collect determinate properties under relations of imperfect similarity. What I find implausible about this view is the denial that these imperfect similarities between determinates correspond to perfect similarities between determinables. It seems to me that *what it is* for two things to be similar is for there to be a property that both have. If this is right, then since being scarlet  $\neq$  being maroon, either scarlet things do not resemble maroon things in respect of their color, or their resemblance consists in the fact that there is another property, redness, that both things have. In other words, denying that redness (or any other determinate or “multiply realizable” property) exists severs the link between similarity and property-sharing.

<sup>21</sup> Fine’s theory of grounding, by contrast, can sidestep the question of whether *any* properties exist, given his view that grounding is best expressed by a sentential operator, rather than (as on my view) a predicate applied to certain facts. See Fine this volume, §4. Fine is motivated in part by a wish to stay neutral on certain questions about the ontology of grounding while laying out the most general theoretical framework. One

we want from our philosophical theories of these properties is a non-circular account of the conditions under which they are instantiated. Critics of grounding, then, may wish simply to deny that there are any such properties. I will not argue at any length here that they would be wrong. But we see immediately one cost of this move; a great deal of common-sense thought must be abandoned.

I have now established a positive case for recognizing grounding. I do not claim that it is conclusive. But it puts us in a fairly good position vis-à-vis the critics of grounding. In a moment, I will begin discussing specific challenges to the belief in grounding. In some cases, it will be appropriate to fall back on the positive argument. “I have given an argument,” I can now say, “that there must be some such relation. If I am mistaken, one of these premises must be false.” I think the critics’ best hope is to attack the examples (as Chris Daly argues).<sup>22</sup> But for the reasons just given, I think there is strong reason to accept them as *bona fide* cases of non-causal explanation. Once again, given the idea that explanations cannot hold brutally, these examples provide strong reason to believe in non-causal determination.

## 4 Grounding and the Natures of Properties

Before defending grounding against its detractors, I want to return to the relation between grounding and the natures of properties. Let’s begin with what are on my view the relata of grounding, facts, understood to be things’ having properties and standing in relations. Taking these to be the relata of grounding has an interesting consequence: grounding does not relate ordinary particulars, objects, considered apart from their properties. A composite object, for example, is not grounded in its simple parts. How could it be, if grounding is a relation between facts? Neither the composite nor any of its simple parts is a fact. Furthermore, while it might seem fine at a glance to speak of the fact that composite exists, and take that to be grounded in the fact that its simple parts do (and are arranged in such-and-such a way, say), this will not do. For existence is not a genuine property. So there is no genuine fact that the composite exists. This is not to deny that it exists, but only to deny that its existing is properly

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such question is precisely what the relata of grounding are. My answer to that question—facts—is responsible for much of what I say here, and for many of my disagreements with Fine and Schaffer.

<sup>22</sup> See Daly this volume.

speaking a fact. Assuming that there are composite objects, there is little doubt that they are in some fashion ontologically dependent on their parts. But that dependence cannot be grounding, if grounding is a relation between facts.<sup>23</sup>

Treating grounding as a relation between facts suggests another important point about the nature of grounding. Grounding is importantly tied to the natures of properties. Whether two facts are suited to stand in a grounding relation depends heavily upon what properties are involved in those facts. Facts involving redness and loudness, for example, never stand in grounding relations with one another. Nothing could be red in virtue of being loud, or loud in virtue of being red (and no range of intermediaries could ever link them together in a chain of grounding). These properties are simply too disparate. Compare maroonness. The fact that a thing is maroon is *bound* to ground its being red (assuming, for the moment, that a given thing's redness is not identical with its maroonness). To label this relationship, let us say that facts are suited to stand in a relation of grounding only if their constituent properties are *essentially connected*.

Now, the reason for this label is that it seems to be of the essence of maroonness that its instances ground instances of redness (in the same particular). And likewise, it is of the essence of redness that an instance of it can be grounded in an instance of maroonness. Equally, we can say that these relations depend on the *intrinsic natures* of these properties. But note that this does not entail that these properties have complex essences, or any kind of internal complexity that might allow us to say more specifically why it is that they stand in that relation. For the sake of example, let's assume that the determinate colors are simple, phenomenal properties. On this account, the fact that maroonness is a determinate of the determinable redness is no doubt relevant. But even so, that relation between the properties does not itself hold in virtue of anything about their natures that we could specify except to repeat that they are so related. There is nothing intrinsic to maroonness that explains why it is a determinate of redness, *except* that it is *this color*, i.e., maroonness.<sup>24</sup>

This is important because the terms 'essence' and 'intrinsic nature' can cause confusion. It may be that there is nothing illuminating we can say about the essence of a property because it is a *simple* property. But it would be a

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Lowe 2009 for discussion of this kind of ontological dependence.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Rosen 2010 on Formality, Mediation, and Moorean Connections, and Fine this volume, §10. Interestingly, Fine takes the essence of the grounded fact to explain the connection, and holds that the nature of the grounding fact, so to speak, knows nothing of the fact it grounds (at least in many cases).

mistake to say that therefore it has no intrinsic nature. It is just that there is nothing to say about its intrinsic nature except what property it is. (I thereby embrace *quidditism* about properties, the view that every property is identical with some non-relational entity.) Perhaps one cannot have exhaustive knowledge of such a property unless one is *acquainted* with it.<sup>25</sup> Fortunately, we are acquainted with at least some of these properties. And that acquaintance makes it quite obvious that nothing can be maroon without being red. (I do not say it is obvious that a thing's being maroon *grounds* its being red.)

Because grounding holds only between facts whose constituent properties are essentially connected, what grounding relations obtain at a world depends on the intrinsic natures of the properties instantiated at that world. And this amounts just to saying that what grounding relations obtain depends on what properties are instantiated. Now, since the nature of a property does not vary from world to world, what is *appropriate* to ground what does not vary from world to world at all. But, on my view, since grounding is a relation between facts, a grounding relation actually obtains only when the relevant properties are instantiated.

## 6 Grounding and Reduction

Before shifting to a defensive stance, let me discuss briefly one last thing that sets my account of grounding apart from the views of others. I deny that when  $p$  grounds  $q$ ,  $q$  thereby *reduces to*  $p$  (or is *nothing over and above*  $p$ ). That is, I deny what Rosen calls the *grounding-reduction link*:

(GRL) If  $q$  reduces to  $p$ , then  $p$  grounds  $q$ .<sup>26</sup>

I reject (GRL) because it is incompatible with the following principles which I do accept:

*Irreflexivity of Grounding*: If  $p$  grounds  $q$ , then  $p \neq q$ .

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<sup>25</sup> See Schaffer 2004 on knowledge of quiddities. It seems to me that one could know, say, that a given quiddity exists without being acquainted with it (perhaps this is our situation with respect to unit negative charge), but knowledge of the *intrinsic nature* of such a property, if it is simple, requires acquaintance with it.

<sup>26</sup> See Rosen 2010, pp. 124-5. Cf. Schaffer 2009, p. 378.

*Reduction as Identity:* If  $p$  reduces to  $q$ , then  $p=q$ .

*Worldly Conception of Facts:* Facts are individuated by their worldly constituents and the manner of their combination.

To take an example of Rosen's, let's suppose that the fact that a certain thing,  $a$ , is a square reduces to the fact that it is an equilateral right quadrilateral (ERQ). Let's use the notation ' $[p]$ ' to stand for 'the fact that  $p$ '. On my view, reduction (in this metaphysical sense) is nothing other than identity. So [ $a$  is a square] is the same fact as [ $a$  is an ERQ]. Given the worldly conception of facts, it follows that [ $a$  is a square] and [ $a$  is an ERQ] have the same constituents ( $a$  and a certain property) and the same manner of combination ( $a$  instantiates the property in question). So the property of being a square just is the property of being an ERQ (and any appearance of asymmetry is owed to a difference between the concepts we used to pick out this property). But if this is right, it had better not be the case that [ $a$  is a square] is grounded in [ $a$  is an ERQ], or we have a violation of irreflexivity. So, to keep these three principles, (GRL) must be rejected.

Rosen rejects instead the worldly conception of facts.<sup>27</sup> This seems to me to yield a very different picture of grounding from the one that I am after, one on which what grounds what is determined at least as much by our concepts as it is by the antecedent structure of the world. What we get from grounds is, at least in cases of reduction, not something *responsible for* the grounded fact, but rather a more accurate conceptual rendering of the very same worldly state-of-affairs. There is of course more to be said, but this should indicate why I reject (GRL). I address the matter at length elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

## 7 The Theory at Work: Some Putative Cases Rejected

The idea that there might be a grounding relation has been the subject of a number of skeptical attacks. Alex Oliver charges that the phrase 'in virtue of' should be banned.<sup>29</sup> Thomas Hofweber accuses the friends of grounding of "esoteric metaphysics," metaphysics that is so detached from ordinary concepts that its theories are immune from the facts — that is (I gather), not susceptible of

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<sup>27</sup> Rosen 2010, pp. 124-5.

<sup>28</sup> Audi forthcoming.

<sup>29</sup> Oliver 1996.

being either supported or falsified by what the world is like.<sup>30</sup> And Chris Daly argues that there is in fact no intelligible notion of grounding.<sup>31</sup> As it happens, I agree with much of what Oliver, Hofweber, and Daly say, but their criticisms show only that there are important constraints on any plausible theory of grounding, not that the notion of grounding should be abandoned. Furthermore, none of these critics' attacks addresses the positive argument for grounding that I have given above.

Let us begin with Oliver, who, in a discussion of Keith Campbell on properties, expresses stern skepticism about a relation corresponding to 'in virtue of'.<sup>32</sup> He discusses two questions raised by Campbell:

In virtue of what is a given red thing red?  
In virtue of what are a given pair of red things both red?<sup>33</sup>

He then comments:

We know we are in the realm of murky metaphysics by the presence of the weasel words "in virtue of". Campbell seems to be asking for some sort of non-causal metaphysical explanation of the facts mentioned in his questions.<sup>34</sup>

Oliver suggests that there are only three possible interpretations of the words 'in virtue of' that would give them any sense. According to him, the question 'in virtue of what is *p* the case' could be interpreted as the demand for a *conceptual analysis* of *p*, for the *ontological commitments* of *p*, or for the *truthmakers* of *p*.<sup>35</sup> In the same vein, he writes "the question "in virtue of what is this sentence true?" can be interpreted as a demand for a truth-maker for the sentence." Then, in a note to this sentence, he continues

It can also be understood as a demand for the ontological commitments of the sentence. Hence a confusion between truth-makers and ontological commitments. "In virtue of" really ought to be banned.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hofweber 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Daly this volume.

<sup>32</sup> Oliver 1996.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Oliver 1996, p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> Oliver 1996, p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Oliver 1996, p. 69.

Banning the phrase ‘in virtue of’ might well have prevented these confusions, but a precise account of what its correct use requires prevents confusion at least as well. As it happens, I agree with Oliver that there are serious mistakes in the cases he discusses, though I blame not the mere use of the phrase ‘in virtue of’ but the misuse of it. Oliver interprets Campbell as asking for a non-causal explanation of why some individuals are red, and why some pairs of individuals are alike in being red, and then dismisses this notion of explanation as too vague.

Against this, first, here is a good place to refer to my positive argument for grounding. If I am right, we must recognize some such relation, and so it cannot be so lightly dismissed. Second, it is precisely because at least certain aspects of the notion of explanation can be made precise that we can see Oliver to be right in rejecting Campbell’s proposed cases. Notice that Campbell’s question is supposed to be fully general, so that an answer would fill in the schema:

For any property,  $F$ , and any individual  $x$ ,  $x$  is  $F$  in virtue of \_\_\_\_\_.

But should we think this schema can always be filled in? I think not. Presumably, the candidates to fill it in that Campbell has in mind are things like ‘ $x$ ’s possessing an  $F$ -ness trope’ and ‘ $x$ ’s standing in the relation of instantiation to the universal  $F$ -ness’. But, familiarly, this merely pushes the problem back. For we might as well ask, now, in virtue of what a thing possesses a trope, or in virtue of what a thing is related by instantiation to a universal. We can avoid the regress only by insisting that fundamental properties are just instantiated by things, or not.<sup>37</sup> There will probably be causal explanations of why they are instantiated, but there must be—on pain of regress—some properties whose instantiation is ungrounded. Property instantiation seems to be a very plausible stopping-point for metaphysical theories. Very little, if anything, can be explained except by appeal to what properties are instantiated. And on my own theory of grounding, it is clear that we would get a regress if we demanded that every property instantiation have a ground, since on my view only property instantiations—facts—are candidates to be grounds. Campbell should have asked *what it is* for  $x$  to be  $F$ . Is it for  $x$  to possess an  $F$ -ness trope, or for  $x$  to stand in some relation to an abstract universal of  $F$ -ness? This is not a demand for an *explanation* of a property’s instantiation, but a theory of it. It is, in other words, simply the demand for a theory of properties.

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<sup>37</sup> For all I have said, a fundamental property may be something like instantiation, or it may be something like negative charge.

As for similarity, can we say that *a* and *b* are similar in being *F* in virtue of the fact that *a* is *F* and *b* is *F*? Only if those are different facts. But I doubt they are. I think what it is for two things to be similar *just is* for there to be some property that both have. Given that this is a case of identity, it is not one of grounding. Here again, the matter is settled not by abandoning talk of grounding but by clarifying it. Grounding is irreflexive and asymmetric, identity reflexive and symmetric. Where there is identity, there is no grounding.

I believe that what I have said about similarity is also true of truthmaking. What it is for a given proposition to be true is (a) for it to correspond to a certain state of affairs, and (b) for that state of affairs to obtain, i.e., to be a fact. Note that the nature of the proposition—it's declaring that a certain state of affairs obtains—is a crucial part of truthmaking, just as the obtaining of the state of affairs is. Now, I see no reason to think that the truth of the proposition is anything other than the holding of these conditions, and so I see no need to posit a grounding relation here. The real definition of truth as the holding of these conditions gives us the ontic requirement on truth—truth is constrained by how the world is—that the truthmaker principle seeks to capture. But it does not bring the idea of grounding into the understanding of truthmaking. In particular, it does not *explain* truth in terms of the conditions that bring it about. It *defines* truth as the obtaining of these conditions.

Now, all of this can be said while taking 'in virtue of' on board. For, of course, those of us who think that phrase (or something with the same significance) is indispensable think there are good and bad ways to use it. No one thinks that we should help ourselves to the locution without demanding any rigor in its application.

## 8 Why Grounding is not “Immune from the Facts”

Another critic of grounding is Thomas Hofweber, who writes

The most common way to be an esoteric metaphysician...[is to] rely on a notion of metaphysical priority: some notion that claims that certain facts or things are metaphysically more basic than other facts or things.<sup>38</sup>

This is supposed to make metaphysics esoteric because one has to understand the relevant notion of metaphysical priority in order to make any sense of what is being claimed. As I read him, Hofweber doubts that any of us really

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<sup>38</sup> Hofweber 2009, p 268.

understands this notion. Now, he is aware of various attempts to render the notion intelligible, especially by providing examples, but he claims that the examples are never strictly relevant. The examples used to tie down the idea will be of some ordinary notion of priority—causal priority or conceptual priority—not of the kind of metaphysical priority that holds especially between necessary truths or objects.

Hofweber's work suggests a dilemma: either the example is one of some acceptable sort of priority—some ordinary sort of priority, that is, that harbors no commitment to grounding—or there is no pressure at all to accept it as any kind of priority at all. The reason behind the second horn, I take it, is that since the relata of the alleged priority relation are both necessary, nothing hangs on whether or not we accept the proposed priority. The same facts will obtain in either case, which shows that these claims of priority are immune from the facts. I want to consider this dilemma as Hofweber deploys it against the work of Kit Fine.<sup>39</sup> I agree with some of his criticisms. But, as with Oliver's, I think the criticisms are motivated by a basic grasp of what grounding is. In defense of that claim, I will argue against Hofweber's contention that grounding is not tied to any relatively ordinary, non-esoteric concept—and in particular, I will argue that it is tied to the concept of explanation.

Hofweber discusses two of Fine's cases. The first is disjunction, about which Fine claims that the fact that a disjunct holds is more basic than the fact that the disjunction holds.<sup>40</sup> This is supposed to give us a handle on the notion of priority in play. But Hofweber charges that while this is indeed a plausible example of priority, it is mere logical priority, just in the sense of asymmetric implication. For any propositions  $p$  and  $q$ ,  $p$  implies  $p \vee q$ , though  $p \vee q$  does not imply  $p$ . Now, I join Hofweber in denying that we have a case of grounding here, but only because I think we should say that on the relevant conception of fact—the worldly conception according to which a fact consists in something's having a property—there really is no disjunctive fact distinct from the fact that one disjunct is instantiated (or, if both disjuncts are instantiated, from the fact that they both are). There is not, for example, a fact that consists in the instantiation of some disjunctive property (I think there is no such thing). And there is no *worldly* fact that has a disjunctive nature. The truthmaker for the disjunctive truth-bearer is just the truthmaker for the true disjunct (or for both of them, if both are true). Still, it should be said in Fine's defense that if one allows

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<sup>39</sup> Fine 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Rosen 2010 accords with Fine on disjunction.

the disjunctive fact, there is no question that it will be posterior to the fact that at least one of its disjuncts holds. And this will not be mere logical priority because the facts in question are not propositions, and not suited to stand in logical consequence relations.

A more interesting case Hofweber discusses is Fine's case of the marriage of Jack and Jill:

Its being the case that the couple Jack and Jill is married [is grounded in] its being the case that Jack is married to Jill.<sup>41</sup>

Hofweber remarks on this as follows:

And this [grounding] relationship is supposed to be an explanatory one. But I have to admit not to follow this. It is a conceptual truth, I take it, that

(6) A and B are a married couple iff A and B are married to each other.

But how is it an explanatory relationship? Even if conceptual connections can be explanatory...this doesn't seem to be a case of it...It certainly would not be a good answer to the ordinary question why Jack and Jill are a married couple to reply because they are married to each other.<sup>42</sup>

Now, again, I want to join Hofweber in rejecting the case, but, again, for different reasons. First, the case should be understood so that the existence of a certain thing, a couple, is grounded in the relevant relation (or that a certain property of a complex object, the couple, is grounded in a relation between its parts).<sup>43</sup> I have some sympathy for the view that there is no such thing as the couple. But even if there is, since I restrict grounding relations to facts, and deny existential facts, I am committed to rejecting this case. But I agree with Hofweber that if  $p$  and  $q$  look to be the same fact in different linguistic or conceptual guises, then it is implausible to think of "them" as standing in any metaphysical priority relation.

Now I want to address Hofweber's objection that grounding does not correspond to, and cannot be illuminated by, any ordinary notion of priority. Why think grounding is so extraordinary? If we return to a case in which the

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<sup>41</sup> Fine 2001, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Hofweber 2009, p. 270.

<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Kit Fine for pointing this out.

facts are plausibly considered non-identical, it is not hard to imagine perfectly ordinary people implicitly grasping that one explains the other. “Don’t do that!” “Why ever not?” “It’s wrong!” “Why is it wrong?” “It’s *unfair!*” Compare the case in which the final reply is “Because it’s just wrong.” I think the ordinary person is apt to *dismiss* that reply, whereas if one thinks the action is not wrong, one will feel some pressure to *deny* the charge of unfairness. Since there is good reason to doubt that this is a causal explanation, it is a good reason to think that ordinary folk can grasp non-causal explanations. Such explanations are *metaphysical*, insofar as they concern matters metaphysical, but, being accessible to the folk, they are not *esoteric*.<sup>44</sup>

What is more, similar points seem to show that grounding is not, contrary to Hofweber’s objection, immune from ordinary facts. His thought seems to be that the ordinary facts are compatible with grounding relations holding in either direction, so that the ordinary facts cannot settle what grounds what. But the order of explanation, in many cases (such as the normative case above), seems to me to be a perfectly ordinary fact. And grounding, far from being immune from such facts, is our only hope of capturing them. Perhaps not all cases are so ordinary, and of course Hofweber is right that two parties can agree that *p* and *q* obtain and disagree about which grounds which. But if the objection that this renders grounding immune from the facts amounts to anything other than the worry that it is esoteric, then it is question-begging. For according to those of us who accept grounding, the facts about the world include the facts about what grounds what.

Furthermore, it is not clear that claims about grounding are insulated from empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. As Daly points out, facts about grounding might be indirectly empirically confirmable by having a place in a well-confirmed theory, a theory confirmed through its empirical consequences.<sup>45</sup> It might also be that claims about grounding are justified in a process of reflective equilibrium. We have beliefs about particular explanatory connections

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed, I have reservations about the distinction between the ordinary folk and the metaphysician or the philosopher. Philosophers are folk who’ve spent a great deal of time thinking about these matters, and are well-informed regarding what others have thought about them. Also, to claim that some concept is a pure artifact of philosophy *and thereby illegitimate* presupposes that the concepts applied in everyday pre-philosophical thought are adequate to express everything we need to say about the world. But that is hard to believe.

<sup>45</sup> Daly this volume.

and we have general beliefs about the rules of explanation. Neither is indefeasible, but they can be mutually reinforcing.

Let me sketch an account of how we might, in several stages, come to be justified in believing a grounding claim, say, that something's being an electron grounds its having a certain causal power, negative charge.

1. We have contact with electrons in a way that enables us to refer to the property of *being an electron*, the quiddity, the intrinsic nature of electrons.
2. We discover a disposition associated with being an electron, the power to repel certain things, and we call this power *negative charge*.
3. We discover that this disposition is associated with other things besides electrons, such as down quarks.
4. We may conclude from this that being an electron is not the very same thing as having negative charge.<sup>46</sup>
5. We find reason to think that things' having negative charge is explained in terms of other facts about them (not the same fact in the case of electrons as in the case of down quarks).
6. These cannot be causal explanations.
7. We conclude that being an electron *grounds* having negative charge.

Now, this account is epistemically hybrid. At least steps 2 and 3, and maybe also 5, involve empirical discoveries. But steps 4 and 6 seem to be *a priori*. All these steps are crucial evidence for 7, the claim about grounding. So it would be oversimple to say only that grounding claims are *a priori*, or for that matter to say only that they are empirical. Like most substantive philosophical claims, their support derives in part from experience and in part from reflection on the information that experience provides.

## 9 The Intelligibility of Grounding

I want now to consider some skeptical worries about grounding due to Chris Daly.<sup>47</sup> He points out, quite rightly, that logical principles about grounding

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<sup>46</sup> I think this is true, but the matter is complicated. See Audi MSa.

(including irreflexivity, asymmetry, transitivity, non-monotonicity, and so forth) set limits on what grounding could be, but fall short of fixing precisely what the content of 'grounding' is. A more promising approach is to attempt to elucidate grounding by noting its connections with more familiar notions. Daly considers a number of putative connections, and finds them lacking.

For example, consider the following definition:

*x* has a *greater degree of reality* than *y* =<sub>df</sub> *x* grounds *y*.<sup>48</sup>

This definition connects the notion of grounding with the notion of having a greater degree of reality. Daly worries that this is a strange notion. Ordinarily, we do not recognize degrees of reality; things are real or they are not. But, as Daly notes, this could be construed as a technical notion of metaphysical priority. (Compare Hofweber on this point.) But while that may protect the notion from doubts we have about degrees of reality in the ordinary sense of reality, it prevents this definition from serving as a means of connecting grounding with an ordinary and well-understood notion.

Now, I would want to explicate grounding in terms of degrees of reality, but it is worth noting that this approach is not a non-starter. Suppose we take the relevant notion of reality to be connected with the notion of a substance: to be real, in the relevant sense, is just to be a substance. So we can get a handle on this notion of degrees of reality, perhaps, through our antecedent understanding of substance. (This will presumably require that we have some grip on the notion of a substance other than as the kind of thing that serves as an ultimate ground.) One might think, for instance, that grounding is essentially tied to the Aristotelian idea that all entities ultimately depend on substances. Grounding is the relation of dependence doing the work in this hierarchical structure.

I think this goes some way toward answering Daly's worry, but it is not a path open to me, since I do not think substances are candidates to stand in grounding relations (at least, not taken *en bloc*, considered apart from what properties they instantiate). Furthermore, I join Daly's skepticism about any salvageable notion of degrees of reality in any ordinary sense of that term. On my view, a grounded fact is every bit as real—and real in precisely the same sense—as the fact that grounds it. But note that someone who espouses the above treatment of "degrees of reality" in terms of substance can nevertheless

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<sup>47</sup> Daly this volume.

<sup>48</sup> This approach, and its elaboration in terms of substance, was floated by Jonathan Schaffer (in personal communication).

deny that there are degrees of reality in the ordinary sense in which to be real is simply to exist.

Consider now another connection between grounding and a more familiar notion, namely, that of explanation. It seems we can safely say that

*x* (at least partly) *metaphysically explains y* just in case *x* grounds *y*.

Might this connection help to explicate grounding? Daly worries that we really have a single concept here, that this move amounts to mere re-labeling, and so fails to shed any light on grounding. Now, the best response to this objection is to insist that grounding is not a form of explanation, even though it is intimately connected with explanation.<sup>49</sup> (Here it is important that the ‘just in case’ be read as a mere biconditional, not as definitional.) But even on the view that grounding should be cashed out as a kind of explanatory relation, a plausible response to Daly is possible. To be sure, stipulating that grounding may be called ‘metaphysical explanation’ does no work at all. But one might insist that grounding *deserves* this name because of an antecedent connection it bears to the idea of explanation. If we already understand explanation, then to some extent at least we already understand grounding.<sup>50</sup>

The intimate connection between grounding and explanation comes through in my own positive argument for grounding. I take ‘explanation’ to be a generic term, with the specific forms of explanation differentiated by the relations of determination that underlie the correctness of the relevant token explanatory claims. Causal explanation is familiar, and *a fortiori* explanation as a generic concept is familiar. We have only to consider that certain particular explanations cannot be causal to see that there must be a non-causal relation of determination. It is that relation by which non-causal explanations are differentiated, and which accounts for their correctness.

Now, my understanding requires explanation to be different from grounding. And there are powerful reasons to think that it is. For all I have said, it may be only a necessary condition of an explanation’s holding between two facts that a relation of determination hold between them. More might be required to fill out a sufficient condition (such as pragmatic or epistemic factors). And even if there are no requirements of that sort—even if, necessarily, *p* non-causally explains *q* if and only if *p* grounds *q*—we should say that the

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<sup>49</sup> On the difference between grounding and explanation, see Audi forthcoming (sec. 2, ii) and Schaffer this volume (sec. 1.1).

<sup>50</sup> Thanks to Jonathan Schaffer for discussion of this section.

explanation is not grounding itself, but a proposition expressing the grounding relation. An explanation, then, is something you can literally *know*; a grounding relation is merely something you can know *about*. The obtaining of the grounding relation, on this account, differs from the explanation in the same way any truthmaker differs from the truth it makes true.

So I believe that the concept of explanation does a great deal to tie down our notion of grounding. And, what is more, philosophical work on grounding helps clarify the notion of explanation, in particular those explanations philosophers are wont to give using the phrase 'in virtue of'. Can we now claim to have a precise account of grounding, one that captures the exact content of the term 'grounding'? Probably not, but we are getting closer. Of course, to a great extent, the content of any term is determined by usage. But usage does not merely create content out of nothing, because usage is often sensitive to antecedent constraints (in this case, those that apply thanks to the connection between grounding and explanation), and to new constraints that arise as we go along. A case in point may be, if I am correct, the relation between grounding and reduction. Grounding may not have been well enough understood initially for it to be obvious that grounding and reduction are incompatible. But by considering what would have to be the case for reduction to imply grounding we find new constraints on what grounding can be. As Rosen points out, perhaps we should cut our losses if we find that incoherencies or insurmountable difficulties with grounding arise early on.<sup>51</sup> But if there are coherent solutions to the difficulties that do arise, this is a reason to continue our attempt to elucidate the notion of grounding and see what work it can do for us.

## 10 Conclusion

I agree with a number of the points raised by the skeptics about grounding, and I agree that we can afford to be facile about grounding's coherence or its ultimate defensibility. But I see no reason yet to abandon the notion. As Daly says, the most promising strategy for pinning down the notion of grounding is the appeal to examples, but (and I agree) this strategy is inconclusive; more work is required to show definitively that the cases to which I have appealed are truly cases involving non-causal explanation.<sup>52</sup> I have indicated why it is plausible to think they are.

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<sup>51</sup> Rosen 2010.

<sup>52</sup> I have attempted some of this work in Audi forthcoming and MSa.

I think the most promising skeptical strategy is to insist on either identity or elimination wherever grounding is alleged to hold. For example, the skeptic might charge that the fact that one has a reason to avoid a given pain *just is* the fact that one is in pain. The pain is the reason. Or the skeptic could insist that categorical properties just *are* dispositional properties.<sup>53</sup> Or the skeptic could argue that there really are no aesthetic properties. If, however, these properties are admitted, and are not identical with the properties that we very naturally claim contribute to explaining their instantiation, then the case for grounding is very strong. Only the notion of non-causal determination can account for the correctness of the relevant explanations. None of the skeptical arguments we have seen gives us reason to doubt that the properties in question—normative properties, dispositions, beauty, meaning, and the like—are instantiated, or to doubt that there are explanations of their instantiation. If philosophy can vindicate the common-sense picture of the world as containing these properties, then we must recognize that there is a relation of grounding underlying the explanations of why they are instantiated.

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<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., Heil 2004. I argue against this view in Audi MSa.

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